Beyond Proficiency: Assessing Coaching Competence in School Principal Candidates and Uncovering Pathways for Growth

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Abstract

As educational leadership increasingly recognizes the pivotal role of coaching competence, this study delves into the nuanced landscape of coaching competencies exhibited by a cohort of 2022 school principal candidates. Amidst the expectations for exemplary instructional leadership, this study reveals a disconcerting reality – school principal candidates exhibit coaching competence only at a fair level, falling short of the desired excellence. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative research design, the authors scrutinized the coaching competence of a diverse cohort of principal candidates through questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Results illuminate specific challenges in coaching, ranging from limited practical application of coaching skills to gaps in mentorship opportunities. Despite the fair level of competence, the study identifies untapped opportunities for improvement, suggesting tailored training and professional development initiatives. The findings not only contribute to the current discourse on coaching competence but also underscore the critical need for targeted interventions to elevate the proficiency of school principal candidates in navigating the complexities of educational leadership.

Introduction

Educational leadership has undergone a transformative shift, with coaching emerging as a linchpin for effective professional development and instructional enhancement (Noble, 2012; Marlow, 2014; Murphy, 2015). Coaching competence, within the realm of educational leadership, refers to the proficiency of leaders in guiding, supporting, and fostering the growth of their team members. Unlike traditional managerial approaches, coaching emphasizes collaboration, reflective practice, and individualized support (Hargrove, 2008; Daniels, Cole, & Wertsch, 2007).

Coaching in educational leadership extends beyond mere task delegation; it entails empowering educators to reach their full potential, promoting a culture of continuous improvement, and ultimately enhancing student outcomes (Page and de Haan, 2014; Cox 2013; Bozer et al. 2013). Competent educational leader adept in coaching skills demonstrate the ability to provide constructive feedback, facilitate goal-setting, and nurture a collaborative environment (Rosha and Lace, 2016).

Despite its recognized significance (Rosha and Lace, 2016; Hargrove, 2008; Daniels, Cole, & Wertsch, 2007), coaching competence faces challenges (Ashworth, Demkowicz, Lendrum & Frearson, 2018; Akin, 2016; Stormont, Reinke, Newcomer, Marchese, & Lewis, 2015). Principals and administrators often encounter obstacles related to time constraints, resistance to change (Akin, 2016), and the need for comprehensive training (Poglinco, Bach, Hovde, Rosenblum, & Saunders, 2003;). Bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application remains a key endeavor in advancing coaching competence.

In the dynamic landscape of educational leadership, coaching competence stands as a critical tool for fostering professional growth, strengthening instructional practices, and cultivating a positive and collaborative school culture (Ashworth, Demkowicz, Lendrum & Frearson, 2018; Rosha and Lace, 2016; Wise & Cavazos, 2017). This overview sets the stage for a deeper exploration of coaching competence among school principal candidates, recognizing its pivotal role in shaping the future of educational leadership.

The importance of coaching competence for school principal candidates is multifaceted, influencing both individual professional growth and the overall success of educational institutions. Coaching competence empowers school principal candidates to become effective instructional leaders. By possessing coaching skills, principals can engage in meaningful conversations with teachers, provide constructive feedback, and support the implementation of evidence-based instructional practices. This directly contributes to improved teaching and learning outcomes within the school (Shirrell, 2016; Wallace Foundation, 2013).

Coaching is a powerful tool for fostering teacher professional development. Principals with coaching competence can tailor support to individual teachers' needs, helping them refine their instructional techniques, address challenges, and

continuously grow in their roles (Collett, 2015; Nicolaidou, Karagiorgi, Petridou, 2016; Ng, 2012). This personalized approach contributes to a more skilled and motivated teaching staff. Coaching competence facilitates the creation of a collaborative and supportive school culture. Principals who can effectively coach their staff foster an environment where teachers feel valued, encouraged to share insights, and work collaboratively toward common goals. This collaborative culture enhances teamwork and overall morale within the school community (Rhodes and Fletcher, 2013).

Through coaching, school principals can provide individualized support to teachers. Coaching conversations allow principals to understand teachers' strengths and challenges, offering targeted guidance and resources (Salter, 2015). Salter (2015) discovered that coaching aided teachers in cultivating critical reflective skills and in independently establishing their own priorities. This personalized approach recognizes the diverse needs of educators and helps build a more responsive and adaptive professional development structure. Coaching competence enhances communication and feedback processes within the school. Principals equipped with coaching skills can provide constructive and supportive feedback to teachers, fostering open dialogue and a growth-oriented mindset. Effective communication contributes to a positive and transparent leadership style. In her work titled "Scaffolds for Change," Collett (2015) provided practical recommendations regarding distinct coaching strategies, including demonstrating, suggesting, inquiring, validating, and commending.

In the face of evolving educational challenges and innovations, coaching competence equips school principals with adaptive leadership skills. In 2012, Du Toit and Reissner discovered that coaching possessed significant influence in enhancing an individual's performance within the workplace. Survey participants conveyed that engaging in the coaching process empowered them to approach their work differently, fostering the development of potential and the assessment of solutions. Ultimately, coaching competence among school principal candidates has a positive impact on student outcomes. By enhancing the effectiveness of teachers and promoting a culture of continuous improvement, coaching contributes to improved student engagement, academic achievement, and socio-emotional development (Charteris and Smardon, 2014; Eastman, 2019). In summary, coaching competence is not just a skill set; it's a transformative approach to educational leadership that empowers school principal candidates to elevate teaching practices, cultivate a positive school culture, and, most importantly, positively impact the learning experiences and outcomes of students.

While educational leadership literature has acknowledged the importance of coaching competence in fostering teacher professional development and school improvement, a notable gap exists in our understanding of how this competence is specifically cultivated among school principal candidates (Juwita & Saefudin, 2017; Juwita & Siswandari, 2018; Juwita, Siswandari, Sutarno, & Wiranto, 2019) Existing

studies often focus on coaching as an isolated skill or attribute of effective leaders (Shirrell, 2016; Wallace Foundation, 2013; Collett, 2015; Nicolaidou, Karagiorgi, Petridou, 2016; Ng, 2012), yet there is a dearth of research exploring the nuances of coaching competence within the unique context of principal preparation programs. This gap in understanding leaves a critical void in the literature, hindering our ability to tailor effective coaching-focused training for aspiring school leaders. Consequently, this study aims to fill this gap by answering the question "What is the overall level of coaching competence among school principal candidates and what are the specific challenges and opportunities associated with coaching competence among school principal candidates in preparation programs?".

Method

Research design

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative research design, employing an online questionnaire to gather rich, in-depth insights into the coaching competence of the cohort of 2022 school principal candidates. The descriptive method is employed as a technique to thoroughly investigate and understand the current conditions or characteristics associated with various entities. According to Nazir (2011), this approach allows researchers to delve into the present status of diverse elements such as human groups, objects, conditions, systems of thought, or classes of events. Through the descriptive method, a comprehensive examination is conducted, providing insights into the unique features, dynamics, or attributes of the subject under study. This method allows researchers to capture a detailed and nuanced snapshot of the current state of the chosen entities, facilitating a deeper understanding of their characteristics or behaviours in a specific context or timeframe. Another viewpoint suggests that the descriptive approach does not aim to validate a specific hypothesis; instead, its primary purpose is to portray the presence of a symptom, variable, or state (Widodo, Erna, and Mukhtar, 2000). Nevertheless, it is important to note that not all descriptive studies exclude the use of hypotheses. While hypotheses are not subjected to testing in descriptive research, they can play a role in identifying alternative scientific procedures to address research challenges.

Research sample

The participants in this study consist of a cohort of school principal candidates who completed their preparation programs in the year 2022. Purposeful sampling will be employed to ensure a diverse representation of candidates from various educational contexts, geographical locations, and program structures.

Research procedure

An online questionnaire is used to collect qualitative data on the coaching competence of the participants. The questionnaire will be designed to elicit detailed responses regarding their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to coaching within the context of educational leadership. The questionnaire will include a mix of open-ended questions and scaled items, allowing participants to provide narrative responses while also offering the option to quantify certain aspects of their experiences. The online platform chosen for the questionnaire will ensure ease of access, participant confidentiality, and efficient data collection.

The questionnaire is composed based on the theory of planned behavior. The theory of planned behavior (TPB) has proven effective in elucidating and predict behavior across a diverse range of behavioral domains (Hagger, Chatzisarantis, & Biddle, 2002). The application of the TPB in this context involves evaluating the attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and intentions of participants regarding their coaching experiences. Traditionally, the TPB encompasses elements such as the target, the action, the context, and the timeframe, as outlined by Ajzen in 2020 (Ajzen, 2020). There were modifications to align with the specific focus of our study. The four elements of TPB modified with three element named STAR (Situation/Task, Action, Result).

An online in-depth-interviews is conducted to elicit rich and detailed information from participants, providing insights into their experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. The interview guide was developed based on the key constructs of the TPB, focusing on attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and intentions. Additionally, open-ended questions were included to capture any unforeseen factors or perspectives that might emerge during the interviews. The three elements (STAR) also used in this phase as a modification of the TPB.

The online questionnaire is distributed to the identified cohort of school principal candidates via SIM PKB. Participants will be provided with a clear explanation of the purpose and assurances regarding data confidentiality. The participants have a designated period to complete the questionnaire. All responses will be stored securely and anonymously, with access limited to the research team.

Data analysis

In the qualitative data analysis phase, the research employs a methodology known as thematic analysis. This approach involves systematically examining the responses obtained from open-ended questions. During this process, the researcher assigns codes to different segments of the responses, grouping them into categories. The overarching goal is to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights related to the coaching competence of school principal candidates. Through this meticulous examination of the qualitative data, the researcher seeks to uncover common threads or recurring ideas that emerge from the participants' responses.

Coding involves assigning labels to specific portions of the data that share commonalities, and categorization involves organizing these coded segments into broader groups based on shared characteristics or concepts.

Thematic analysis allows for a rich and in-depth exploration of the qualitative data, offering a nuanced understanding of the various perspectives, experiences, and insights provided by the participants. This methodological approach helps to derive meaningful themes and patterns, contributing to a comprehensive interpretation of the coaching competence among school principal candidates as perceived by the participants in the study. The analysis will be an iterative process, involving multiple rounds of coding and discussion among the research team to ensure rigor and reliability in the identification of themes.

Participants' responses will be classified into two categories: acceptable and not acceptable. Evidence is deemed acceptable when it comprises a complete STAR statement, is based on recent occurrences, avoids theoretical or future-oriented content, and is presented in an original manner. Conversely, evidence is considered unacceptable when participant responses fail to meet these specified criteria.

Results and Discussion

Results

The findings from the study revealed that 47% of participants reported having acceptable responses, while 53% indicated that their responses ware not acceptable. The result can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Participants Responses on Coaching Experiences

No.	Responses Category	(%)
1	Acceptable	47%
2	Not Acceptable	53%
	a. Not recent behavior (more than 3 years ago)	16%
	b. Theory/ future oriented statement	28%
	c. Plagiarism (more than 30%)	5%
	d. Partial STAR	2%

The participants' responses in this study will be sorted into two distinct categories: acceptable and not acceptable. The categorization is based on specific criteria that define acceptable evidence. For evidence to be considered acceptable, it should meet the following criteria: it must include a complete STAR statement, it should pertain to recent events, it must avoid being theoretical or future-oriented, and it should be presented in an original form. The STAR statement ensures that the evidence is clearly defined and has a tangible impact. Additionally, the requirement for the evidence to be based on recent occurrences emphasizes the importance of currency and relevance. The exclusion of theoretical or future-oriented statements

ensures that the evidence is grounded in actual experiences rather than speculative or abstract concepts. Lastly, the emphasis on originality highlights the importance of unique perspectives and authentic contributions from the participants.

On the other hand, evidence will be considered not acceptable if participant responses do not align with these specified criteria. This categorization allows for a rigorous assessment of the quality and relevance of the evidence provided by participants in the study.

The table 1 indicate that 47% of participants reported having an acceptable coaching experience, suggesting that they perceive themselves as possessing sufficient expertise in this domain. Conversely, 53% of participants expressed that their coaching experience fell below an acceptable threshold, signifying a perceived lack of adequate experience among this subgroup. This dichotomy underscores the varied levels of experience within the participant pool and emphasizes the distinctions in their self-assessed coaching proficiency.

Within the study, 53% of the evidence provided by participants was deemed not acceptable. This classification was primarily attributed to several factors. Firstly, evidence was considered not acceptable when it pertained to behaviors or events that occurred more than three years ago, as the study specifically focused on recent behaviors. Additionally, evidence containing theoretical or future-oriented statements was categorized as not acceptable, emphasizing the need for a grounded and present-focused approach.

Furthermore, instances of plagiarism exceeding 30% were marked as not acceptable, underscoring the importance of originality and the ethical handling of information. Lastly, evidence deemed incomplete in terms of the STAR criteria was also placed in the not acceptable category. This comprehensive evaluation ensured that evidence meeting these specified criteria was acknowledged as acceptable, while instances falling short of these standards were identified as not meeting the required level of quality.

That finding aligned with Ajzen's (2021) work on the importance of intention in predicting behaviour. The acceptable coaching competence is associated with effective communication, tailored support, trust-building, reflective practice, and a student-centric focus. These competencies align with Ajzen's finding, where the intention to exhibit these coaching behaviours becomes crucial for predicting actual coaching behaviour. The intention to communicate effectively, provide tailored support, build trust, engage in reflective practice, and focus on student outcomes is likely to manifest in the observed coaching competence.

On the contrary, the study identifies unacceptable coaching competence linked to issues such as incomplete STAR statement, not recent behaviours, theoretic, and future oriented statement. According to Ajzen's work, the absence of intention to exhibit these coaching behaviours might contribute to the observed shortcomings. Principals who lack the intention to apply coaching strategies practically, adapt to

diverse contexts, incorporate feedback, manage time efficiently, or embrace change are likely to exhibit lower coaching competence.

Ajzen's finding underscores the importance of shaping individuals' intentions to influence behaviour. In the context of school principal candidates, this suggests that principal preparation programs should not only focus on imparting knowledge and skills but also actively work on fostering the intention to employ effective coaching strategies. Programs should emphasize the importance of communication, tailored support, trust-building, reflective practice, and a student-centric focus as intentional elements of coaching competence.

Discussion

The finding that 47% of the evidence was considered acceptable represents a significant opportunity in the realm of coaching competence among school principal candidates. This indicates that a considerable portion of the participants demonstrated satisfactory levels of recent, relevant, and authentic coaching experiences. These individuals are likely equipped with valuable insights and practical knowledge that can contribute positively to coaching practices within the educational context. This opportunity suggests a potential for cultivating a pool of competent leaders well-versed in effective coaching methodologies.

PC2: In 2022, our school received assistance in the form of several units of Chromebooks. Due to the fact that the use of Chromebooks differs slightly from the use of laptops in general, and considering that the majority of my colleagues are over the age of 50, I took the initiative to organize a workshop on utilizing Chromebooks in teaching. The goal was to educate all school members to maximize the use of these assets for learning. A significant challenge was the initial lack of response from some colleagues to the program. I communicated with the School Principal and conducted technical guidance sessions every day after the completion of regular classes. As a result, 7 out of 10 teachers in my school are now able to operate Chromebooks effectively, while the remaining ones still require intensive support from me.

PC3: In 2021, I observed that students were feeling bored during classes. They lacked interest in the explanations provided by the teachers. I encouraged the teachers to identify the problem and find solutions. One of the solutions was the use of interactive media to enhance student engagement. I accompanied the teachers in creating simple instructional videos using video editors, Canva, PowerPoint, and Powtoon to assist students in their learning. I provided examples of existing videos to stimulate their knowledge. Ultimately, most teachers were able to create instructional videos that captivated students and made them more interested and active in learning.

PC27: In 2021, I served as a mentor for students participating in the local level Scout competition. The specific category I handled was knot-tying skills. After identifying

several students with potential in this skill, I invited them to engage in regular training sessions. I provided references for them to study at home and assigned contextual tasks to enhance their skills. I motivated them to believe in themselves during the competition. Thankfully, they performed well and got the 2nd place in the local competition.

Some participants mentioned their experiences in complete STAR statement. "2022, 2021" indicated the behavior happened recently. "*Due to the fact that the use of Chromebooks differs slightly from the use of laptops in general, and considering that the majority of my colleagues are over the age of 50*", "*students were feeling bored during classes*", "*served as a mentor for students participating in the local level Scout competition*" are situations or tasks, while "*organize a workshop*", "*conducted technical guidance sessions*", "*provided examples of existing videos*", "*provided references*", "*motivated them to believe in themselves*", are authentic coaching actions.

That finding provided evidence deemed acceptable in coaching competence suggests a substantial opportunity within the cohort of school principal candidates. These individuals demonstrated a commendable level of recent, relevant, and authentic coaching experiences. This presents a promising foundation for fostering effective coaching practices among future school leaders. The opportunity lies in harnessing the insights and knowledge possessed by this group, potentially contributing to the development of a cohort of competent educational leaders well-versed in successful coaching methodologies.
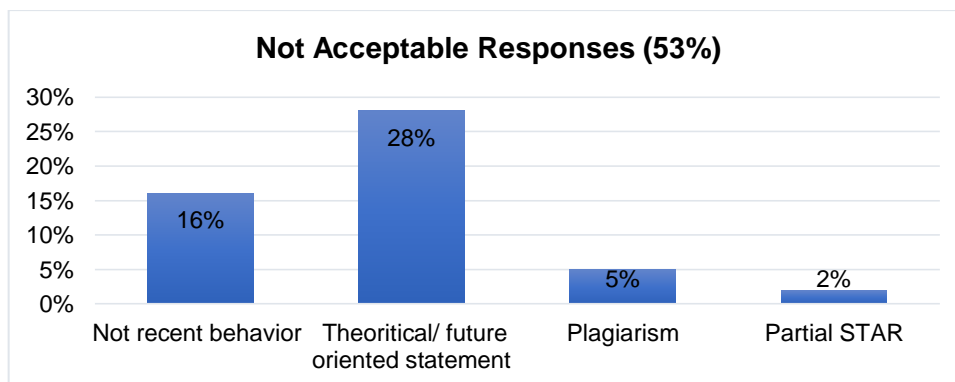

Figure 1. The challenges of coaching competence

On the other hand, the discovery that 53% of the evidence was deemed unacceptable unveils specific challenges in coaching competences among school principal candidates. These challenges can be further categorized based on the nature of the inadequacies (see figure 1):

a. 16% not recent behaviour (more than 3 years ago): a notable challenge arises from instances where the reported coaching experiences occurred more than three years ago. This lack of recent engagement suggests a potential gap in staying current with evolving coaching practices and methodologies.

   PC21: I am a 4th-grade teacher at a Public Elementary School. In 2015, I participated in a 7-day training program on the 2013 curriculum. Following the completion of the training, I was tasked with disseminating the knowledge to my colleagues. I guided my fellow teachers in implementing the curriculum until they were able to apply it in their classrooms.

b. 28% theoretical/future-oriented statements: another challenge stems from responses that contained theoretical or future-oriented statements. This suggests a need for a more grounded and practical understanding of coaching, emphasizing the importance of experiences rooted in actual events rather than speculative or theoretical discussions.

> *PC37: In all the development initiatives I have undertaken, the emphasis has been on enhancing students' knowledge and skills. To facilitate this development, obtaining mutual understanding is crucial to reach the desired agreement. As a result, self-awareness emerges, serving as motivation for maximum engagement in the development process.*

c. 5% plagiarism and similarity (more than 30%): a smaller yet significant challenge relates to instances of plagiarism and similarity exceeding 30%. It highlights concerns regarding originality and integrity in reporting coaching experiences, underscoring the importance of authenticity in the provided evidence.

> *PC19, PC50, PC51; had 78%, 56%, and 86% level of plagiarism*
> *PC45 and PC46; the plagiarism in under 30% but their responses are similar even though they were both from different districts*

d. 2% Incomplete STAR criteria: additionally, a challenge arises from evidence that was incomplete in terms of meeting the STAR criteria. This emphasizes the importance of ensuring that reported experiences are well-defined, time-specific, attainable, and directly related to coaching competence.

> *PC94: During the 2021 pandemic, I took part in a lot of training on the use of media in learning. I always share the results of the training with my friends. I teach them how to use Google Classroom to upload material, give assignments, and assess student learning results. (only Situation/Task and Action, no Result found)*
> *PC112: I always pay attention to my students in grade 2 elementary school. I teach reading with interesting strategies. I use colorful cards, with pictures of animals, fruit and vehicles that they like. I also give prizes to students who can read fluently. My strategy turned out to be successful in making students enjoy learning to read and almost all of my students can read fluently (only Action and Result, no Situation/Task)*

Petrea (1997) discovered that the TPB posits that the significance of particular elements is, to some extent, influenced by the specific behavior being studied. Aligning with Petrea's work;

1. this study reveals a spectrum of coaching competence among school principal candidates, encompassing both acceptable and unacceptable dimensions. Considering Petrea's theory, it becomes evident that the relative importance of specific components of coaching competence varies among candidates and situations,
2. some school principal candidates may showcase coaching competence influenced significantly by social factors. These candidates may excel in collaborative and interpersonal skills, emphasizing effective communication, trust-building, and tailored support, as these behaviors are socially valued within the educational leadership context,
3. individual attitudes toward coaching behaviors may predominate. Principals who express a positive attitude toward reflective practice, student-centric focus, and adaptability may exhibit higher levels of coaching competence. This aligns with Petrea's assertion that individual attitudes play a crucial role in specific behaviors,
4. Petrea's theory suggests that the specific behavior under investigation (coaching competence, in this case) is influenced by situational factors. Factors such as program structure, institutional support, and the complexity of the educational environment may

interact with individual and social influences to shape coaching competence among school principal candidates.

The implication of principal preparation program should acknowledge the nuanced interplay of social influences, individual attitudes, and perceived control in coaching competence. Programs should be designed to address these varied components based on the unique needs and contexts of individual candidates.

Future research in the field of coaching competence among educational leaders can delve deeper into understanding the relative importance of specific components. Exploring the situations or contexts where social influences, individual attitudes, or perceived control play a predominant role can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of coaching behaviors.

Understanding these challenges presents an opportunity for targeted interventions and improvements in coaching competency development programs for school principal candidates. Addressing these challenges can contribute to a more robust and effective coaching culture within educational leadership.

Conclusion

The study on coaching competence among school principal candidates yielded valuable insights into both opportunities and challenges within this critical domain of educational leadership. The identification of 47% acceptable evidence indicates a substantial opportunity to leverage the experiences of a significant portion of participants who demonstrated commendable coaching competence. This presents a foundation for cultivating a cohort of educational leaders with a robust understanding of effective coaching methodologies, poised to positively influence their respective school environments. Conversely, the recognition that 53% of evidence was deemed unacceptable sheds light on specific challenges that warrant attention and intervention. Notable challenges include instances of coaching experiences happening more than three years ago, the prevalence of theoretical or future-oriented statements, concerns about plagiarism and similarity, and instances of incomplete adherence to the STAR criteria.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Continuous professional development, incorporating real-time coaching experiences, and emphasizing the application of theoretical knowledge in practical scenarios can contribute to mitigating challenges related to the recency and practicality of coaching experiences. Additionally, promoting academic honesty and providing guidance on meeting the STAR criteria are essential steps in enhancing the authenticity and completeness of reported coaching experiences.

In summary, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of coaching competence among school principal candidates, offering a roadmap for improvement and development. The identified opportunities underscore the potential for cultivating a cadre of adept educational leaders, while the highlighted challenges pinpoint specific areas for targeted interventions, ultimately contributing to the overall enhancement of coaching competence in the realm of educational leadership. These

findings offer valuable guidance for educators, policymakers, and educational institutions aiming to strengthen coaching practices within the context of school leadership.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Ratna Juwita devised the project, the main conceptual ideas, literature review, results composition, and final editing. Eka Budhi Santosa performed data collection. Fatma Sukmawati organized data analysis and data presentation.

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